

## The Bishop's Charge to the 145th Synod of the Diocese of Niagara

I speak to you +in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Good morning members of Synod. Now some might accuse me of having a one-track mind – but I find that in life – particularly in the life of the church - that sooner or later all roads eventually lead to George Herbert. And so it is that the lines of his poetry that kept coming to my mind as I thought and prayed through our readings for this morning were these ones – you know them – they're in our hymn book:

Let all the world in every corner sing,  
"My God and King!"  
The heavens are not too high,  
His praise may thither fly;  
The earth is not too low,  
His praises there may grow.  
Let all the world in every corner sing,  
"My God and King!"

Let all the world in every corner sing,  
"My God and King!"  
The church with psalms must shout:  
No door can keep them out.  
But, more than all, the heart  
Must bear the longest part.  
Let all the world in every corner sing,  
"My God and King!"

I'll tell you why these lines kept coming to me. We have many strong and beautiful scriptural images to work with this morning. The first is the very beautiful psalm 96 – a song of praise; a song which itself is calling for a new song. And singing that new song is the theme of our Synod so there's lots to say about that. Then the passage from Revelation of the new heaven and the new earth. And then – as if these weren't enough – Jesus walking on the water and Peter stepping out of the boat in the Gospel of Matthew. Such riches. But how do they all fit together?

Well, this is church and so the answer must always be Jesus, our God and King.

Our psalm says sing to the Lord a new song; something surprising and different; a song asking for new things, new blessings. And let all the earth sing this song – every tribe and nation. But not only all people but all the earth too: the seas roar, the fields exult and the wild creatures raise their voices - all singing this new song.

And what's the content of this song? Well, we're singing about the Alpha and the Omega. We're singing about the promise of this new heaven and earth – a gift from God.

As one scholar writes, "We can discern its outline already in the Gospel of Jesus, crucified, and risen. Because God is with us already -- in the proclamation of the Gospel, at the table of our Lord, and in the Spirit filling the church -- we are witnesses to that coming new city, with our words and with our lives.

We carry gracious hints of its coming when we live out costly love for one another (John 13), and when we practice radical welcoming love to those otherwise left outside. (Acts 11)."<sup>1</sup>

That's a pretty good song. And this all sounds great. Wonderful even. And then we get to the Gospel and it becomes slightly complicated. Or real. Let's go with real.

So we're in the middle of the Gospel of Matthew and we pick up the action after Jesus has just fed a multitude. He's gone to pray apart from them and he sends the disciples on ahead of him to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. And that's where things get dicey. There was a storm. Now keep in mind these were experienced fisherman – and they were struggling with this storm all night so it must have been bad. They were exhausted, depleted. And they were just trying to get to the other side to meet Jesus – to rest and to safety.

And to top it all off, they think they see a ghost and that's confusing. You see, the sea was a fearful place in biblical times – it was the provider of sustenance but at the risk of death. And to see Jesus come walking across the waves that had defeated them all night must have been unsettling.

And then Peter, seeing and hearing that it's Jesus, steps out of the boat. And we have to ask why? Step into a storm – onto water? But scholars tell us that this is simply Peter acting like a typical disciple – wanting to be where his teacher was – doing what his teacher was doing. So here's the thing: I doubt Peter expects a walk on the sea in a storm is going to solve all his fears.

When he steps out of the boat, he enters a tumult – chaos. He chooses to risk walking on an unfamiliar surface. It's clear that his motive isn't to escape from danger, that's for sure. Peter is entering the danger but with one difference – he enters with Jesus.

Peter goes into a situation where the threats then look different. He goes into a place where Jesus is defying the chaos and reordering everything.

All the things Peter thinks he knows – the way things are – or aren't - all the old impossibilities – Jesus reorders it all – all those assumed limits. He's walking on water for crying out loud! Ever try that? Yeah - no. Because you can't. Not unless apparently, you do it in the power of Jesus.

And we can see that Peter believes that. He willing to risk his life for that belief. He gets out of that boat and goes. I mean it looks incredibly dangerous but you have to admire the bravery don't you? You have to admire the fact that he tries. But he was overwhelmed by the rational impossibility of what is – the fact that people can't walk on water because they will drown. And he sinks but not before crying out – "Lord! Save me!" And of course – of course – Jesus does. And then he says: "you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Why did you doubt; doubt me, doubt yourself? Why?

Once safe back in the boat, I think it's fair to say that the disciples realized that everything is different now --- because of Jesus. Because Matthew clearly depicts Jesus as the Lord over all of creation – even to the point of mastery over nature, the deeps, the chaos, drowning and death.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Peterson, Preach This Week, Commentary on Revelation 21:1-6

Okay so you know where I'm going next. I haven't exactly been subtle with my exegesis this morning.

Isn't that where we find ourselves in the church? Doubting Jesus and doubting ourselves? Well, no wonder. It's stormy out there. So I want to talk to you about that storm just for a bit.

You know all about it on one level – because you're in the midst of it. I daresay every parish in this diocese is experiencing the same general trends because the church across the whole of the western hemisphere is experiencing these trends. You may have already seen the latest study of the trends in the Anglican church of Canada and it is sobering.

There's a decline in attendance numbers, the ageing of our core demographic, the changeable attendance patterns of those who are there, coupled with a reduction in revenue – which of course, has an impact on the number of ministries and programs - and on the clergy, licensed lay workers and staff to lead them. Add to that deferred maintenance on many of our beautiful but ageing buildings and the external – often government-mandated – pressures of compliance with various regulations, . . . I could go on, but you all know the details of this situation.

Added to that, we're in the midst of a turbulent time in our culture – when all the old norms and customs are shifting, or just don't seem to make sense at all. We live in a time of gaslighting and fake news and the resurgence of the extreme right; in a time of technological brilliance but also a time of anxiety as that same technology remolds our society; we live in a time of climate anxiety. We live -- in a time of incredibly fast-moving change.

In the midst of all this - we are the church – people who believe in the eternal and stable, love of God for all of humanity and for creation.

However, change does affect the church – just as it has affected every other institution in our culture. This is the perfect storm. We are experiencing change in every corner of our church.

The thing we cannot do is carry on and hope it will all just pass. It won't. We are living in what sociologists call a time of discontinuous change. When change is constant and unconnected with what came before. Our world is being remade before our eyes. And in the church, that means we are in the midst of a new Re-formation as a result.

I'm not inured to this as a bishop any more than all of you. Please know that I lose sleep over it too. I stand with you in this perplexing time.

Having said that – and granted I am a glass half full kind of person - but I just can't see this time as entirely negative. I also think it's exciting. As much as this is a perplexing and challenging place to be, I think we in Niagara are in an exciting place too – not to mix my metaphors too much - but we are at the same time being buffeted by the waves of the storm as also seeing the green shoots of new growth. There is something profoundly biblical about where we are: in the already and the not yet.

I also want to say to you that if this narrative of the storm tells us anything it tells us that we should expect that God will be found in places where the status quo and predictable endings don't apply as before.

Incredibly turbulent places are also what Celtic Christians call “thin places,” where we can expect God to break through; where the Lord of Sea and Sky not only calms the storm, but all creation rejoices in the act. And this is where we get the clues for what we are called to in these times.

This is the new song. You see, the church is called to be in these places of chaos and difficulty. But like Peter, with a difference. Remember why the creation rejoices? Because of Jesus. Because it’s Jesus who’s right there in the midst of that storm calling us out of the boat.

You know I reckon it’s not such a big deal that Peter began to sink. Surely the point of that part of the story is to press home to us his bravery in stepping out – and the fact that in order to triumph over that storm and find a way to walk on a new surface, we need to keep our eyes focussed on Jesus in the midst of it all and to trust – and trust deeply that God will reorder that chaos.

So my friends, how are we going to step out of the boat with our eyes fixed on Christ? How are we going to learn how to sing this new song to the Lord of all creation?

Before I get into any specifics let me lay a bit of groundwork and say first, that if I know anything, I know this: whatever we do, we will do it together. We are all in this together, as disciples; disciples that take a particular form in this time and in this place – in the Anglican church of Canada – in a Gospel partnership of bishop and people.

Next is to say that all that we do together in this Gospel partnership is built upon the renewal of our faith in Jesus Christ.

This work of renewal is foundational. Engaging in spiritual refreshment is first order business – without which, the works of faith have less vitality and commitment. Our faith is the engine for mission. And so we must begin with revisiting why it is we do what we do. We must keep our eyes firmly focused on Jesus. The centre must hold. To attempt to skip this step will inevitably have us sinking. And there is such a rich banquet of ways to help us do this – ways that address the diversity of our church ranging from the Revive program to Alpha. There are so many to choose from. But I hope and pray that you will choose one thing in your parishes to offer the refreshment and nurturing of faith as a gift for everyone.

How else are we learning to sing a new song?

First, we have been undergoing a rather intense and satisfying process called Mission Action Planning. We have been seeking God’s vision for our diocese in prayer and through a discernment process. This process has been facilitated by Martha Asselin and Marlie Whittle from M&M International, and expertly guided by our own Canon Christyn Perkons – who is also the author of our beautiful MAP prayer which we prayed together as our collect a few moments ago. My thanks to Christyn for offering her skills to this process in particular.

We’ve been intentional in having representation from across the diocese on the MAP leadership team. And as you’ll hear later this morning, what is emerging is a diocesan plan which is being formed from the grass roots up. As you know, we’ve been intentional and diligent about the consultation process – from Town Hall meetings to questionnaires to personal interviews and an environmental scan. We’ve engaged with the non-churched and the de-churched and we’ve harvested a lot of data and will form our plans based on real testimony if you like – not on guess-work.

There is no coincidence that the acronym for this operation is MAP. Because that's what it is. A map to chart our trajectory in the next 3 to 5 years. The hope is that this map – constructed by us all – will also deeply inform the direction that is taken in our parishes as well – in whatever ways makes sense in your context.

One of the most significant things that has emerged out of our consultation process is a deep concern about the Climate Crisis, the most pressing moral and theological issue of our time. The momentum has been building over many years and with the international Climate Strike action it reached a crescendo this year. As people who believe in the goodness of the created order, it's incumbent upon Christians to do what we can to increase and intensify our efforts to care for our environment. It's my expectation that all our parishes will seek building efficiencies wherever possible and consult with the Greening Niagara committee for other ways to walk lightly on the land. This committee will take on a renewed focus and higher profile as we seek as a diocese to fulfill our baptismal vow to safeguard all of creation and sustain and renew the earth. Our young people in particular need us to demonstrate our commitment to this part of our new song.

And helping to support these efforts is our Secretary of Synod. Bill has initiated a review of our Canons, policies and regulations. This systematic review is being done now with a view to making sure we have the flexibility within our structures, which we'll review too, to fit our current reality, to support our work of renewal and the mission to which God calls us. This includes the introduction of a new Canon for Diocesan Missions which will help us initiate new forms of ministry. We'll hear a little more about that later in Synod.

In doing this review, we will examine how our polity is embodied in our day to day interaction – looking for adequate structures of consultation and community building to facilitate and support healthy, local ministry and fellowship.

We've started this sort of process for Cathedral Place and I'm grateful for Archbishop Colin Johnson's work in this regard, alongside Canon Terry DeForest. Let me just say how grateful I am for his willingness to serve as the Rector in the interim of our Cathedral while we discern who to call as our next Dean – in addition to his ongoing good work in his Human Resources portfolio.

Our senior leadership team is doing this, in part, through a process is called the Inter Diocesan Learning Community and it's rich sharing of resources and ideas from around our country. It's aimed at what Archbishop Rowan Williams called "a principled loosening of structures" and is an exciting – and liberating process.

As an aside, you need to know that the way we are structured is important, and a gift. I have observed over the past few years that we have a crisis of understanding about our polity. And that is almost entirely because we have forgotten how things work. So I urge us all to become more aware of how we are organized and the reasons why. We can only improve our functioning when we understand it.

This will be important as we undertake new ministries; missional ministries. The word "missional" is a specific term meaning ministry with and for the non-churched and de-churched. That means offering the good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to those who have either never heard it, or to those who have had experience of the church and left for a variety of reasons.

This offering is the mission of God and it's one we're all called to.

Missional ministry will take many forms – and many of them already exist in our diocese from The Table so adeptly led by Sarah Bird, our Program Consultant for Children, Youth and Family Ministry, to the Chinese Mission in Oakville led by our missionary, Garfield Wu and our Migrant Farm Workers ministry down the Peninsula led by our missionary Antonio Illas. Our hope and prayer is that all of our ministry going forward will be slowly but inexorably shaped for mission.

And Missional communities within our parishes are hopeful indications that this process is well underway. Ministries such as the Advent Café at St. George's St. Catharines; to the Third Space ministry that's taking shape at the Church of the Nativity in Hamilton to the Children's Theatre Company at Christ Church Wainfleet to the Community Lunch for vulnerable women and children at St. James, Fergus and many, many more – too many to mention by name! All of these ministries have been discerned by listening to and watching for where God is at work and then joining that mission. The fact that all this innovative ministry is already happening means that we are on our way to becoming a missional church – and that is such good news! So many thanks to our talented and missionally attuned leaders for their ministry.

All of these communities have their place according to context but they share one thing in common – they are dedicated to being the face and hands of Christ and to offering the gift of faith in Jesus in their neighbourhoods. I find that really exciting. The Spirit is moving. And as another sign of that movement we have more good news.

By the Grace of God is that we have the gift of a missional community which has evolved over this past year on the site of the old St. Luke's. Rob and Jamie Miller who have come to us from St. Clair Church, a thriving church plant in Hamilton, have begun an intentional community in the Rectory at St. Luke's and they are beginning to gather a community of Christians who are saying the Office together each day in the church. Now, as Synod will remember, St. Luke's was disestablished some time ago and this evolving community represents something interesting and organic that God has done through Rob and Jamie and in that neighbourhood. We're going to tend that green shoot gently and water it and pray that God gives the growth. Rob, I wonder if you could stand up – if you want to know a little more about the St. Luke's community, you can catch up with him at one of our breaks.

It's my intention that Rob has many church planting colleagues in the Diocese of Niagara in the coming years. But for that, we need to develop some new/old skills. And we'll need a singular focus on missional skills-development and for that we'll need a School of Missional Leadership – for lay and ordained: a consolidation and shaping for mission of all of our diocesan Christian education programmes as well as the addition of a focused missional post ordination / continuing education stream so that our leaders are well-resourced and well supported and can continue the learning journey throughout their vocations. We'll also approach our curacies differently and try what we're calling differentiated curacies – a time of learning and skills-acquisition in the immediate post-ordination period that is focused and aimed at developing gifts and building competencies for our leaders. We'll be also be partnering with some experienced missional leaders from other denominations to learn and share some different skills for ministry.

So. We have been and will continue to till the soil for mission in the diocese of Niagara. And as we do, we are identifying our needs as we work through our reorientation. For instance, I foresee that we will soon need the help of a Diocesan Missioner – a dedicated and experienced church planter to come and help us focus our diocese in this direction and to help support and resource these ministries and to scale up our endeavours.

And on the subject of skills and gifts – you’ll have noticed over the course of this year that we have had a number of staff transitions to right-skill us for this time in our common life. Deirdre Pike joins us as the Program Consultant for Social Justice and Outreach and Gillian Doucet-Campbell joins us as our Director Stewardship & Development. You’ll hear from both of them later in Synod too. Please do avail yourselves of the opportunity to speak with them and invite them to come and be part of your plans for the future in your parish.

We’re also working through our missional priorities with regard to our properties. We need buildings. Our buildings are containers for ministry and our commitment is that all of our buildings will support our mission in one way or another. Whether that is by housing ministry or by using the proceeds from sales to underwrite ministry in another mission field is the question. Making that determination is a ministry in itself and requires expertise and an understanding of both the church and its community. I am grateful to Canon Terry Charters for his service as the Chair of the Bishop’s Advisory Committee on Property Renewal and to the whole committee whose expertise is a great gift to us.

You’ll notice that our Diocesan budget is largely unchanged this year. I want to thank Canon Jody Beck and Canon Pat Davis for all their consistent and substantial efforts in creating this budget report. We are blessed by their diligence and care of every single detail. The budget, going forward, will of course be impacted by the strategic priorities that will emerge through our mission action planning process.

When we take a close look, our present numbers tell a story. What we know is that the number of identifiable givers has declined but the average gift has increased. That means we have fewer people giving more. First of all, let me say God bless you and all in every parish and ministry in our diocese and thank you on behalf of us all for giving to support the ministry of the church. We could not – in the name of God – do what we do without the commitment of us all.

But. If we feel that we are being called to sing a new song something different is going to be required. You’re probably expecting me to say that fewer and fewer folks can’t keep giving sacrificially. Actually, I don’t believe that to be the case. I think that could absolutely happen.

But what I don’t believe can happen, is that we can do any more than sustain what we are already doing on that vision. We have been and will continue to align our budgeting to the shape of mission and to our realities but in an institution in which there are fixed costs that are necessary and unavoidable such as adequate personnel, insurance, building maintenance, operating costs, etc, - and where the needs placed on diocesan staff with regard to all this and much much more are strenuous at times, this situation is not infinitely sustainable. You all know this. We face the same strictures and demands in our parishes.

The fact is, if we want to sing a new song boldly, and continue to renew our faith, to shape our leaders for new circumstances, to plant new communities and to both identify and respond with new ministry to emerging areas of concern, we’ll have to have more room in our budget to accomplish these things.

It’s all exciting. And deeply challenging. We will definitely need to keep our eyes firmly on Christ as we work our way through all of these plans. But it’s often in the most challenging times in life that we sense God’s presence with us, isn’t it?

But remember this. Remember that when Peter called to Jesus: “Lord, help me!”

Remember what happened?

Jesus takes his hand, reminds him not to doubt, and then calms the storm – and the disciples see him for who he truly is: the Lord of sea and sky, the great I AM.

And what do they do then? They go back to work on shore, communicating the Good News of Jesus the Christ in their midst – Jesus, who carried on healing and loving and transforming every heart and every life he touched. I think that tells us something about what’s being asked of us too.

So. As this is a Charge, I’d like to charge you all similarly first with a work of discernment, and then of action:

First: Commit to renewing and refreshing your faith.

And second: When you engage with the Mission Action Plan later in Synod, please think and pray about where you can offer your gifts and skills for this work in your parish – and then in the diocese – but in that order.

This is the ministry to which we have all been called: to minister in and with our communities, transformed by an encounter with Jesus, in a new and missional way.

Now I cannot conclude without conveying my thanks. St. Paul’s image of the Body of Christ springs to mind here. Every member of the body is so important, and crucial to the health of the whole. My first and greatest thanks is to all of you. And I sincerely hope that you will convey these thanks to all of the people whose hearts and interests you carry with you here today. This is a great diocese – filled with people who have literally given their lives in the service of Jesus in their parishes. My favourite services of the year are when I have the pleasure of presenting the Order of Niagara to faithful lay Anglicans across our diocese. I am constantly humbled by the time and the talent that they have placed at the service of our church. I thank God for all the ministries you perform from forming our children in Sunday school to being wardens to leading bible study; from your ministries to the sick, the refugee, the hungry and the poor to providing endless meals for parish events and coffee hours to taking care of our properties to serving in liturgies to offering your secular skills in the service of your God and your church to a hundred other things you do – day in, day out, seen and unseen for our church.

Next I’d like to thank all our clergy and licensed lay leaders. It was a great pleasure to ordain five new deacons for our diocese just a few weeks ago. Can I ask Jody Balint, Michael Coren, Judy Steers, and Fran Wallace to stand please? Welcome to you all; and to Ann Vander Berg who was also ordained on that very good day for our diocese.

I want to express my gratitude to all our licensed lay and ordained leaders first, and most importantly for who you are – for all of your gifts, and your faithfulness in ministering in the storm of change in which we find ourselves. You and I know the scale of the work and it’s – it seems, ever-increasing demands and the incredible skillset that it calls forth from you. Much is asked of you in this day: both more and different skills and gifts than would have been asked from you a generation or two ago and you meet those challenges with grace and courage and with that most precious charism: creativity. And I thank you most profoundly for that.



And lastly, but certainly not least, I want to thank the staff in the synod office. These are the servants with whom I work very closely, day in day out. They are diligent, hard-working, creative and dedicated. And we could literally not be the diocese we are without them. So my profound gratitude and thanks to you all. Your price is above rubies and I, in particular, am daily grateful for you and your talents. But most of all I am thankful for the ways in which you offer those talents sacrificially in the service of our beloved church. Thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Let me thank one person in particular from the Bishop's office: Canon Alison D'Atri. She does an almost impossibly complex job with grace, deep commitment and most of all with love. And I am grateful beyond words for her support and experience. Thank you Alison.

We are blessed indeed in Niagara.

Friends, I know I've covered a lot of ground in this charge. But it's indicative of what's happening on the ground. And there's lots more too! But that's enough for now. You know, as Christians we believe that the former things can pass away and new realities come into being. We believe in Resurrection and new life. And I hope that you can see and hear that we are living into those beliefs with intentionality too.

And as we learn together how to sing a new song to the Lord may God continue to bless us richly and deeply.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.